DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 753 CE 065 588

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TITLE Promoting Middle Schoolers' Understanding of the World of Work.
PUB DATE Dec 93
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the American Vocational Association Convention (Nashville, TN, December 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Career Counseling; Career Development; *Career Education; *Career Exploration; *Educational Objectives; Educational Research; Education Work Relationship; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; *Middle Schools; Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

A study identified major goals of middle-grade education as perceived by scholars of early adolescent education and those activities and learning experiences in career-oriented education program areas experts perceived as promoting achievement of the goals. Thirty-nine scholars indicated on a Likert-type scale their level of agreement regarding whether 15 goals identified from the literature should be considered major goals of middle-grade education; 18 major goals were identified. Thirty-five exemplary middle-grade career program teachers listed the activities/learning experiences within their program areas that they perceived as promoting achievement of each goal; 103 items were synthesized from the instruments. Three rounds of a modified Delphi technique identified those items that experts perceived as promoting achievement of major goals of middle-grade education. Six activities were identified: students individually carry out a program of planned, hands-on activities designed to investigate roles of workers in occupations; students receive instruction aimed at identifying occupations within career areas; students receive instruction regarding the roles of workers in occupations; students are taught by teams of career-oriented program teachers and core subject teachers; students identify occupational areas that match their aptitudes and interests; and students take field trips to business and industries. (Contains 13 references.) (YLB)

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PROMOTING MIDDLE SCHOOLERS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD OF WORK

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Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Early adolescence includes the ages of about 10 to 14 years and is characterized by many changes associated with the onset of puberty. The physical, intellectual, and emotional development of early adolescents is unparalleled in any other life stage except during the early days of infancy (McEwin & Thomason, 1989). Because of their rapid development, early adolescents have unique educational needs for which the middle-grade school (grades six through eight) was designed.

According to Eichhorn (1966):

> Due to cultural factors, physical maturation is occurring in individuals at an earlier chronological age than formerly; this trend is accompanied by similar trends in social interests. It is characteristic of American education to develop organizational patterns commensurate with the nature of its students; the current status of human growth and development suggests there is a definite need for designing a middle school to be based on the compatible physical and social traits of the students (p. 1).

Early adolescence is an important period during the vocational development and occupational choice processes. According to Super (1963), the first of two major stages in the vocational development process, the exploratory stage, coincides with early adolescence up to the adult years. It is during the exploratory stage when individuals begin formulating vocational goals.

Early adolescents need to participate in activities that help them begin the career selection process (McEwin & Thomason, 1989). According to Miller (1988),

> ...research indicates a need for all students in middle school to be presented with a broader range of occupations in our society. After all, it is unlikely that a student could realistically set as a goal an occupation to which he or she has not been personally exposed (pp. 176-177).

To increase career awareness, Sale (1979) recommended that the middle-grade curriculum integrate career exploratory and academic course work to demonstrate the connection between school and work, but not focus on job training. Student organizations can play important roles in the middle-grade curriculum by providing early adolescents means to explore personal interests and develop a sense of identity (Lounsbury & Vars, 1978; Jones, 1990).

Eichhorn (1966) emphasized the importance of basing the middle-grade curriculum on the characteristics of early adolescents. With those characteristics in mind, Brazee and Smalley (1982) discouraged academic and physical competition at the middle-grade level. According to Brazee and Smalley, for the more talented students, competition can enhance self-concept, but for the less talented, competition with peers often results in shame and feelings of little self-worth.

Responding to the vocational development needs of early adolescents, the number of career-oriented education programs (agriculture, business, general career

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education, health occupations, home economics, marketing/distribution, technology, trade and industrial) has increased at the middle-grade level in recent years (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; Epstein & MacIver, 1990), and this trend is expected to continue (Barrick & Hughes, 1992). Indicating a reason for the increased number of programs, Alexander and McEwin stated that

> ...work in an appropriate career is our hope for every citizen. Therefore, with the ever widening scope of possible careers for both men and women our guidance-interested citizens and educators have pressed for early exposure of children to the work world and careers, especially as they approach choices of specialized preparatory courses in high schools. Hence a variety of required and elective, usually short-term, courses of careers in general (plus specific career-oriented ones) have been introduced in the middle grades... (p. 18).

Although the number of career-oriented programs has increased in the middle grades, the programs have been criticized for not adequately meeting the educational needs of early adolescents (Harrington-Lueker, 1990). For career-oriented programs to be effective at the middle-grade level, and to continue to increase, the programs must be based on the needs and characteristics of early adolescents and promote achievement of middle-grade education goals.

Educators have an opportunity to develop exemplary middle-grade programs which are congruent with middle school philosophy and meet the needs of early adolescents. To facilitate development of exemplary programs, major goals of middle-grade education needed to be defined along with activities/learning experiences in career-oriented programs areas that promote achievement of those goals. The study on which the reported research is based identified those major goals and activities/learning experiences recognized as promoting achievement of the goals. This paper examines one of the goals - "to help students develop an understanding of the world of work" - and its associated activities/learning experiences.

Methodology

The objectives of the study on which the reported research is based were to: a) identify major goals of middle-grade education as perceived by scholars of early adolescent education, and b) identify activities and learning experiences in career-oriented education program areas that are perceived by experts as promoting achievement of major goals of middle-grade education.

Three steps were used to accomplish the objectives. Content and face validity of the measurement instruments were assured through a review and revision process involving graduate students and faculty members at Ohio State University. Reliability was established through a test/retest procedure.

Step One

Scholars of early adolescent education indicated on a six-point Likert type scale (1=very strongly disagree, 2=strongly disagree, 3=disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree, 6=very strongly agree) their level of agreement regarding whether each of 15 goals identified from the literature should be considered a major goals of middle-grade education. The scholars could also write in additional goals. Those goals receiving a mean rating of 4.5 or more were considered to be major goals of middle-grade education.

The scholars were identified with assistance from Dr. Tom Dickinson, editor of Middle School Journal, the journal of the National Middle School Association. Thirty-nine scholars agreed to participate in step one of the study. Following a reminder card and a second complete mailing to non respondents, 34 (87%) scholars returned usable instruments.

Step Two

One hundred sixty-three exemplary middle-grade career program teachers from Florida, North Carolina, and Wisconsin were nominated to participate in the study by teacher educators and state education agency personnel in those states. The three states were noted by Dr. Tom Dickinson as being among those states in the forefront of middle-grade education. Seventy-eight (48%) of the 163 teachers agreed to participate in the study.

The 78 teachers were mailed an instrument that included the major goals of middle-grade education identified in step one. The teachers listed under each goal those activities/learning experiences within their program areas which they perceived as promoting achievement of the goal.

Following a reminder card and a second complete mailing to non respondents, 35 (45%) teachers returned usable instruments. The researcher synthesized 103 items from over 3000 activities/learning experiences submitted by the teachers. University faculty and graduate students monitored the synthesis to ensure that there was no deviation from the perceived intent of the teachers' original responses. The 103 items were included in a modified Delphi instrument in step three.

Step Three

Three rounds of a modified Delphi technique were used to identify those items in step two that were perceived by experts as promoting achievement of major goals of middle-grade education. Sixty-seven Delphi panelists were selected from four groups: a) scholars identified in step one who indicated they would participate in step three; b) career program teachers identified through the nomination process in step two who indicated they would participate in step three; c) principals of U.S. Department of Education (1991) designated "blue ribbon" middle-grade schools in Florida, North Carolina, and Wisconsin; and d) core subject (math, science, language arts, history, social studies) teachers nominated by principals of the blue ribbon schools.

The Delphi instrument included the major goals identified in step one and the corresponding 103 items synthesized from the activities/learning experiences in step two. Panel members were instructed to indicate: a) if each item was appropriate for middle-grade students based on the needs and characteristics of early adolescents, and b) the degree to which they believed each item promoted achievement of the corresponding goal under which it was listed.

Panelists indicated their level of agreement on a six-point Likert type scale. The responses were converted to numerical scores (very strongly disagree=1, strongly disagree=2, disagree=3, agree=4, strongly agree=5, very strongly agree=6). The criteria established for an item to be considered as promoting achievement of the goal under which it was listed were that the calculations for the item must yield: a) a median response of 4.5 or higher, b) a 25th percentile value of 4.0 or higher, and c) no more than three panelists responding "not appropriate for early adolescents".

Results

Eighteen major goals of middle-grade education were identified in step one of the study. This paper focuses on one of those goals: "to help students develop an

understanding of the world of work". As a result of step two, the 15 activities/learning experiences listed below were synthesized from those perceived by middle-grade career program teachers as promoting achievement of the goal. In step three, six of those fifteen activities/learning experiences were identified as promoting achievement of the goal based on the established criteria. Those six activities/learning experiences are denoted by **bold print** in the following list.

1. **Students individually carry out a program of planned, hands-on activities during regular school hours that are designed to investigate the roles of workers in various occupations.**
2. **Students receive instruction aimed at identifying occupations within various career areas.**
3. **Students receive instruction regarding the roles of workers in various occupations.**
4. **Students are taught by teams of teachers that include career-oriented program teachers and core subject teachers.**
5. **Students identify occupational areas that match their aptitudes and interests.**
6. **Students take field trips to businesses and industries.**
7. Students individually carry out a program of planned, hands-on activities outside of regular school hours that are designed to investigate the roles of workers in various occupations.
8. Students receive instruction on the influence of international events on the U.S. economy.
9. Students "shadow" workers on the job.
10. Eligible students participate in cooperative job placement programs in businesses and industries.
11. Students compete against other middle-grade students in contests that require the use of skills needed by workers in various occupational areas (e.g., forestry skills contest, computer skills contest).
12. Students compete against middle-grade and high school students in contests that require the use of skills needed by workers in various occupational areas (e.g., forestry skills contest, computer skills contest).
13. Students individually carry out a program of planned, hands-on activities outside of regular school hours that are designed to develop specific job skills.
14. Students individually carry out a program of planned, hands-on activities during regular school hours that are designed to develop specific job skills.
15. Students are members of career-oriented student organizations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions and recommendations are based on the positions and comments expressed by the Delphi panelists. Conclusions and recommendations pertain to the goal "to help students develop an understanding of the world of work" and its corresponding activities/learning experiences.

Beliefs and perceptions expressed by the Delphi panelists generally are in agreement with the literature on middle-grade education. Based on the results, activities/learning experiences that help early adolescents prepare for future career roles promote achievement of middle-grade education goals. Congruent with Sale's (1979) position, the panelists believe that these activities/learning experiences do not include specific job training. In agreement with Brazee and Smalley's (1982) position, the panelists do not perceive competitive activities as playing particularly constructive roles at the middle-grade level. The lack of support indicated by the panelists for

career-oriented student organizations is somewhat contradictory to positions expressed by Lounsbury and Vars (1978) and Jones (1990) which are supportive of clubs and interest groups for middle-grade students.

It is strongly recommended that the philosophy and goals of middle-grade schools reflect the need for students to develop an understanding of the world of work and to begin preparing for their roles in the work force. However, specific job skills training should not be emphasized in middle-grade programs. Activities/learning experiences that are part of career-oriented programs should emphasize student participation over competition and provide means for all students to experience success.

Examples of activities/learning experiences that should receive high priority in increasing early adolescents' awareness and understanding of the world of work are those that:

1. relate to the roles and responsibilities of workers in various occupational areas;
2. promote student contact with local businesses and industries;
3. help students assess their occupational interests and aptitudes, and identify occupational areas that match those interests and aptitudes;
4. demonstrate the connection between school and occupation through an integrated curriculum developed and delivered by teachers in both the core subject and career program areas;
5. provide students a variety of means to explore many career options;
6. occur during regular school hours; and
7. downplay competition among students.

The results of this study have implications for teachers and administrators at the state, university, and local levels. State education agencies should encourage the continued development and implementation of career-oriented programs in the middle grades by providing effective leadership and support for the programs. State-level officials who have responsibilities in career-oriented program areas should be knowledgeable of middle-grade education principles and appropriate activities/learning experiences. The results of this study should guide state-level officials in assisting local middle-grade school administrators and teachers provide effective activities/learning experiences.

Teacher educators in career-oriented program areas should incorporate instruction related to middle-grade educational practices and philosophy into the curriculum. Teacher educators should be actively involved in developing career-oriented curricula for middle-grade students, providing in-service activities for middle-grade teachers and administrators, and conducting related research. The results of this study should be used in developing pre-service and in-service programs and in guiding research efforts.

School administrators should be knowledgeable of middle-grade education practices and assist teachers in becoming experts in teaching early adolescents. Administrators should strongly encourage and support the continued professional development of middle-grade teachers. The results of the is study should guide administrators as they assist teachers in providing effective career-oriented programs for early adolescents.

Career program teachers and core subject teachers should work cooperatively in developing and delivering an integrated curriculum which demonstrates the connection between education and employment. The results of this study should serve as a guide to classroom teachers as they design and implement activities/learning experiences for early adolescents.

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